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Assassination Probe, Revisited

"The assassination that will not die," is how a headline writer once described the unending controversies over the murder of President Kennedy. The shabby turmoil in the House of Representatives over its investigation of that assassination, and that of Martin Luther King, lends new truth to that phrase and casts new doubt on the House investigation.

We have favored the idea of a careful re-examination by Congress. We had thought that it could, as the chief national deliberative body, provide a rigorous, prestigious, credible antidote to the endless swirl of skepticism and shadowy conspiracy theories.

But the House investigating committee has become an abundant source of its own controversy. There had been earlier concerns about its original huge budget request, about the proposed use of electronic investigative devices, and about criticisms of the background of the staff director, Richard Sprague. In the wake of this agitation, the House gave the committee only a temporary renewal, until March 31. Now, open warfare has erupted on the committee. Chairman Henry B. Gonzalez, Democrat of Texas, dismissed Mr. Sprague for insubordination and overspending his budget. In a startling step, the other members of the committee promptly instructed Mr. Sprague to ignore the dismissal.

However the dispute is patched together, we fear the damage is done. The furor poisons the committee's most important attribute, public respect. With so much controversy even at this early, organizational stage of work, it is hard to see how the committee can command the credibility essential to its substantive work. Regretfully, we urge the House to drop the investigation. Much as we would welcome a sober study from a responsible body, what the public emphatically does not need is an investigation that is tarnished from the start.